

RECORD VERSION

**STATEMENT BY
BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT BENNETT
UNITED STATES ARMY ADJUTANT GENERAL**

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

FIRST SESSION, 115TH CONGRESS

ON

**A REVIEW OF THE INTERAGENCY TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AND
THE NEED FOR ENHANCED OUTCOME MEASUREMENTS**

NOVEMBER 8, 2017

**NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

STATEMENT BY
BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT BENNETT
UNITED STATES ARMY ADJUTANT GENERAL

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, members of the subcommittee, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the Army's Soldier for Life – Transition Assistance Program, or SFL-TAP. SFL-TAP is first and foremost a Commander's Program. SFL-TAP mandates several courses, based on the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act, and also includes other required courses, or Career Readiness Standards (CRS), that help prepare Soldiers for their transition from active duty.

Soldier for Life – Transition Assistance Program VOW Requirements

SFL-TAP requires all eligible transitioning Soldiers to complete the VOW to Hire Heroes Act requirements, which include Pre-separation Counseling, Department of Labor Employment Workshop, and VA Benefits Briefings I and II.

In fall 2017, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) provided a draft review of Transitioning Veterans: DOD Needs to Improve Performance Reporting and Monitoring for the Transition Assistance Program. Army concurs with all six recommendations found in the draft report. Army's SFL-TAP XXI system currently captures most required data elements needed to implement report recommendation numbers 1 through 5. We will continue to work very closely with OSD Transition to Veterans Program Office (TVPO) in order to identify an optimal way ahead for synergistically leveraging and interfacing the data capturing and reporting capabilities of the DOD TAP Enterprise System with our own SFL-TAP XXI system.

While the Army is very proud of the significant role it has played, along with our DOD, Sister Services, and Interagency Partners, in developing and implementing the myriad

of major enhancements that have been made to TAP since the passage of the VOW Act (thereby benefiting hundreds of thousands of transitioning service members), Army believes that there is one important area in which TAP could and should continue to evolve, that is, with respect to the timely receipt of key “post transition from active duty” outcome data from our interagency partners. For example, Soldiers who are deemed by their Commander to have not met their CRS prior to transition from active duty are given a “Warm Handover” to the VA or Department of Labor (DOL) for follow-on post transition assistance.

Army strongly believes that receiving feedback from our interagency partners on both the type of assistance provided as well as the outcome (result) of such assistance is critical to our ability to accurately gauge and assess the overall long-term efficacy of our efforts. Such feedback, when timely, would greatly assist us in identifying what is working effectively as well as any TAP elements or processes in need of revision or improvement. Army currently does not receive any specific feedback (data) from our interagency partners on the results of warm handovers. We continue to closely collaborate with them (both at the TAP Governance Senior Leader level as well as at the action officer subject matter expert working group level) on developing a strategy to facilitate the flow of this key data.

Army utilizes a multifaceted approach in disseminating the importance of TAP and additional resources throughout a Service member’s military career. Under current Army policy, Soldiers are required to be counseled by their unit leadership within six months of arrival at their first permanent duty. This counseling on Army responsibilities and opportunities includes the requirement to create an Individual Development Plan. Newly arrived Soldiers are also referred to installation Army Education Centers where they meet with counselors and receive information on educational and credentialing opportunities available to them (e.g., Army COOL).

Soldiers continue to receive other timely transition/career/opportunity related information at key touchpoints (e.g., promotion) throughout their military career. The Soldier for Life

- Transition Assistance Program makes both traditional and emerging strategic communication efforts a priority to communicate efforts to leaders, Soldiers, Family members, and stakeholders. The program continues to actively engage media, including frequent articles in Army magazines, installation papers, and national media outlets. SFL-TAP engages in other traditional marketing through posters, banners, flyers, Fact Sheets, Information Papers, briefings to commanders (such as the Company Commander/First Sergeant Course and the Pre-Command Course), and promotion of the program throughout the Soldier Life Cycle. Through a robust social media strategy, which includes Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, LinkedIn Groups, and YouTube, SFL-TAP reaches thousands of veterans, employers, and transitioning Soldiers every day. SFL-TAP Centers at the installation level often have active Facebook pages and other social media platforms as well.

With respect to recommendation number 6, which focuses on seeking ways to minimize the subjectivity involved in making career readiness determinations, Army believes it will be essential to implement this recommendation in such a way so as to preserve the flexibility of TAP. The career readiness determination needs to be equipped with more objective standards, yet avoid establishing a “one size fits all” solution that is incapable of tailoring to the individual Service member.

In addition to DOD’s TAP reporting systems, the Army utilizes TAP-XXI, which is the Army’s “system of record,” in order to provide commanders at the lowest level, key information and reports to fulfil their responsibilities under SFL-TAP policy and law. TAP-XXI has two primary functions, client management and reporting. TAP-XXI reporting consolidates key transition data from several Army HR systems of record which allows company commanders to correctly identify Soldiers required to complete the TAP curriculum. The client management portal of TAP-XXI allows counselors and Soldiers to schedule attendance and track completion during the distributed timeline (i.e, over an extended period). Army strongly encourages Transitioning Soldiers to utilize the SFL-TAP resources early and often.

These reports help ensure the Soldier is career ready and prepared for their civilian transition. Those that are successful in transition become advocates for recruiting future Soldiers. Fine-tuning TAP-XXI into the most comprehensive TAP management system has allowed Army civilian counselors to better track individual compliance and satisfaction with the program.

The first full year of tracking compliance for the VOW Act was in fiscal year 2013. During that time, the Army received a compliance rate of 4.5 percent. However, SFL-TAP has seen improvement since then, reaching an 85 percent compliance rate in fiscal year 2016 (DoDTAP reported 76% for Army) and an 88 percent compliance rate in fiscal year 2017 (DoDTAP reported 84% for Army). Those who do not meet VOW requirements are given a warm-handover to the Department of Labor and/or Veterans Affairs, as appropriate.

As our compliance rate and commander involvement have increased, the Army has seen a vast reduction in unemployment compensation expenses.

Army Improves Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Service Members (UCX)

The Army closed out fiscal year 2016 with the lowest amount of Unemployment Compensation for Ex-Service members (UCX) in 13 years at \$172.8 million, according to the Department of Labor.

Fiscal year 2016 is the first time UCX has dipped below the \$200 million mark since 2003, where it closed out at \$152 million. Army UCX expenditures peaked in 2011 at \$515 million and have been decreasing since that time due to a combination of economic factors and Army efforts to better prepare Soldiers for the civilian sector. Integrating Soldiers back into the civilian world successfully depends on a number of determinants, including civilian industry knowledge of valuable Veteran skill sets, dispelling myths about Veterans, as well as local economic conditions.

Army UCX numbers are on-track to break another all-time low in fiscal year 2017. We expect to receive final Fiscal Year 17 data by mid-November.

Program Funding

All validated requirements are provided for and funded across the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP).

In fiscal year 2017, the Army requested \$87.7 million for Active Army, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve for the transition program. In fiscal year 2018, the Army has requested \$86.3 million. The Army has received this funding and is using it to provide transition services at the validated requirements level.

Transition Pilot Program

The SFL-TAP Transition Pilot started in November 2016 at six Army installations. The pilot is designed to evaluate tailored transition assistance for Soldiers, based on their assessed “risk level” for drawing unemployment. The objective is to better allocate resources to those that need additional support during the transition process. The pilot focuses primarily on transition requirements for eligible non-retiring enlisted Soldiers. The goal of the pilot is to correlate the type and amount of mandated transition assistance services for a Soldier, with their likelihood of applying for unemployment compensation. Soldiers deemed to be at greater risk for being unemployed are required to participate in more mandated services than Soldiers less likely to apply for unemployment compensation. The ultimate objective of the pilot is to learn how to better tailor SFL-TAP requirements for all transitioning Soldiers, based on individual needs. The Army’s Transition Pilot will last approximately two years from the start date and initial data from the pilot is expected in the spring of 2018. To date, approximately 21,000 Soldiers are involved.

Army Career Skills Program

The Department of Defense Skill Bridge program is implemented by the Army through the Career Skills Program, or CSP. CSPs include pre-apprenticeships, on-the-job training, job-shadowing, employment skills training, and internships that transitioning Soldiers can attend during their last 180 days prior to transition from active duty. These first-class programs afford Soldiers the opportunity to obtain industry-recognized skills and move into high-demand and high-skilled jobs. In fiscal year 2016, 2,625 Soldiers enrolled in CSPs, with a 95 percent completion rate, which resulted in the job placement of approximately 2,150 Soldiers. Fiscal year 2017 programs are on-target to exceed these milestones.

The first Army CSP was established in April 2013 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord with United Association Veterans in Piping (UAVIP). UAVIP hosted 22 participants and since that time, the Army has approved over 116 CSPs, hosted at 25 Army installations. The Army's CSP has resulted in over 4,600 employment opportunities for transitioning Soldiers. The program continues to grow each year.

The Army works with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, as well as federal and non-federal entities, to determine potential programs to add to the Career Skills Program in order to increase civilian employment opportunities for transitioning Soldiers. The focus of CSP program offerings include "no-cost" opportunities with at least an 85 percent graduation rate and of those graduates, an employment rate of at least 90 percent.

SFL-TAP Virtual Center

The Army is the only Service that provides a virtual platform with transition services for Soldiers and other Service members. In addition to round-the-clock telephonic counseling, a virtual software interface provides a live forum for synchronous counselor-led transition services to clients all over the world all day, every day, with the exception of three holidays a year.

The SFL-TAP Virtual Center is manned and trained to provide a full-range of transition services. The Virtual Center provides transition services to deployed Soldiers and Service Members of all branches, as well as those that are remotely located stateside and unable to attend classes and counseling at a brick-and-mortar location. Though the Virtual Center is available to all Service Members, the preferred and recommended option for Service Members to receive transition services is through brick-and-mortar locations.

The system provides clients and staff the ability to interact online through live classes and counseling sessions. The program allows clients to ask questions via a microphone or typed comments. Counselors and Soldiers have a full-range of communication and computer capabilities, including desktop sharing, document uploads/downloads, videos, webcams, and website links. Additionally, internal SFL-TAP program needs, such as meetings and training events, can be conducted inside the Virtual Center, saving both time and money.

In fiscal year 2017, the SFL-TAP Virtual Center telephonically assisted over 43,000 Soldiers and provided transition counseling to over 15,000 Soldiers through the Virtual Center software. This is a 38% increase in the amount of calls received in fiscal year 2016. SFL-TAP has seen growth each year since the inception of the Virtual Center in October 2011. A service that originally received only 34 total calls in its first month, the Virtual Center in fiscal year 2018 is on track to set records for calls received, as the SFL-TAP Virtual Center has become a trusted resource for transitioning Soldiers.

Army Hosts Hire a Soldier Campaign

The Army has increased our marketing efforts over the past fiscal year to include innovative online techniques. In the summer of 2017, SFL-TAP hosted their first social media campaign to encourage the hiring of transitioning Soldiers. The five-week campaign was supported by the Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel Dailey and featured a variety of events on Facebook and Twitter. The campaign brought together civilian

employers and transitioning Soldiers, giving them the platform to discuss resume advice, job seeking tips, and transition opportunities.

The main event of the campaign was a Twitter Chat on resume writing and job seeking skills. SFL-TAP partnered with Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS), Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits Administration, Army Warrior Care and Transition (WCT), National Guard Citizen Soldier for Life (CSFL), Army Reserve Private Public Partnership (P3), and the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Services (DOL VETS) for the Twitter Chat.

The Twitter Chat used a hashtag (keyword categorization on Twitter) that the SFL-TAP Program Office created called #HireaSoldier. The hashtag gained so much interest and use that Twitter made it “trending” on the platform, which lists the hashtag on the side of a user’s home page as a popular topic. On the day of the Twitter Chat, the hashtag reached almost 4 million Twitter users, further spreading awareness of SFL-TAP and hiring Soldiers.

The Twitter event and Facebook events provided the platform and conversation for companies to collect resumes from Soldiers that participated and initial reports showed that the interview process had started for Soldiers who had networked during the event. SFL-TAP plans to hold future events like this.

Conclusion

The Army’s SFL-TAP is committed to serve transitioning Soldiers throughout their transition process and help them become better prepared for the challenges and successes they will face in the civilian sector. To conclude, I thank you for your continued support. The Army is dedicated to being the leader of Department of Defense transition efforts by finding better ways to help our Soldiers and Veterans. Chairman Arrington, and members of the sub-committee, I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you, and I look forward to your questions.